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Senate Panel Told Reform Office Has Tools To Pursue School Improvements

Since being moved to the Executive Office earlier this year from the Department of Education, the state's School Reform Office has the tools it needs to help drive Michigan's worst schools to improve, the Senate Education Committee was told Thursday, as the office can focus now on working with district superintendents and use data to better drive improvements.

Committee members pressed Karen McPhee, **Governor Rick Snyder's** education policy director, and Natasha Baker, the state's school reform officer, to say if the strategy the state was pursuing now to deal with Michigan's worst performing schools means the strategies used since 2010 had failed.

"We are refocusing the effort," Ms. McPhee said to chair **Sen. Phil Pavlov** (R-St. Clair). The state cannot solve the problems of its lowest performing schools without fully understanding what the dynamics are that drive problems, she said, and "it takes tremendous capacity to do that."

And the state was somewhat caught during those previous years trying to improve its poorest schools while also competing with other states for promises of major federal funding for school improvement efforts, she and Ms. Baker said.

The state now has 214 schools designated as priority schools. While the largest number is in southeast Michigan, the schools are spread across the state. Most tend to be in urban districts. A total of 100,000 students attend those schools.

Since the state began identifying in 2010 the lowest performing schools - those in the lowest 5 percent of all schools - there have 331 marked as priority schools. Of those, 73 closed and 44 released after improving.

Earlier in 2015, **Governor Rick Snyder** issued an executive order moving the school reform office out of the Department of Education into the Executive Office. The move was greeted with some controversy, especially as Mr. Snyder has promoted efforts such as the Education Achievement Authority in Detroit that has been under ongoing fire and has been investigated by law enforcement.

But Ms. Baker said since the move, the office has been better able to customize its efforts to work with districts and the individual schools.

One step she has taken is to work with the district superintendents more than the individual school buildings. "We are more triage, more like an emergency room," she said.

While the department can work with the specific building personnel, her office sends the superintendent data

on a variety of factors, including attendance, every six to eight weeks.

"We can customize intervention based on data," Ms. Baker said.

She and Ms. McPhee also said that while other states have had greater success in terms of turning schools around, it was important for Michigan to develop its own plan to fix low performing schools.

Even so, one of the primary elements of making that fix will be to focus on actual instruction, they said.

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